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Author and conservation biologist writes about plight of honeybee

By JANE PALMER

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SANTA CRUZ -- The honeybee may be in trouble but there are solutions, according to bee lover and author Reese Halter.

A conservation biologist from California Lutheran University, Halter is spreading the buzz about bees around the country and promoting his book, "The Incomparable Honeybee and the Economics of Pollination."

In the last few years, U.S. beekeepers have experienced unprecedented die-offs of their bees, with some losing a quarter to a third of their hives, according to the Journal of Apicultural Research. While scientists have been unable to agree on a cause, Halter has his own theory.

"There is no one smoking gun," Halter said. "It is a perfect storm, a collision of events that causes it."

The way domestic bees are treated and large-scale pesticide use are the main culprits, Halter believes.

Bees are typically fed sugar and high fructose

corn solution instead of their natural diet, honey, he said.

"It is too expensive to let bees eat what they need to eat," Halter said. "And their immune systems are blown apart."

When used commercially to pollinate crops, bees typically eat only one type of pollen such as almond pollen, Halter said. For bees to buzz happily, they are supposed to eat a wide array of pollens, he said. This leaves them even more susceptible to infestation by mites, such as the varroa mite, he said.

"When an organism is ill and their immune system is not strong, these mites get in the trachea and they choke them to death," Halter said.

Modern farming techniques also play their part, said Halter. He notes the wide-scale use of the pesticide Imidacloprid, manufactured by Bayer under the trade names Gaucho and Pancho. Halter believes the pesticide is responsible for the death of millions of bees.

"Bees are the modern day canaries in the coal mine," Halter said. "We have got to get away from these toxins."

Solutions to the crisis do exist, Halter said. He suggests people should strive to buy only organic produce and never use pesticides or fungicides in their own gardens.

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"If each of us just changed one thing, we can make a difference," Halter said. "One thing different is a massive change."

With spring around the corner, Halter suggests planting vibrantly colored -- yellow, red, blue -- native plants to attract and feed the bees. Placing a bowl of water in the backyard will help the bees, which are thirsty, he said.

"This is an epic, epic situation," Halter said. "But the great thing is that there are solutions."

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